

The background of the page features several large, stylized handprints in a light grey color. One handprint is on the left side, another is on the right side, and a third is at the bottom right. The hands are open, with fingers spread, and they overlap each other and the text area.

Peter's second letter to the Christians of the dispersion starts with these words: "Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ . . ." (2 Peter 1:1).

In these opening words several significant thoughts merit our attention. First, equality of faith. Peter's readers were blessed to have a faith no less than Peter's faith. Second, the righteousness of God—a righteousness that not only made all souls equal, but a righteousness that treats all souls equally.

## **EQUAL FAITH FOR EQUAL SOULS**

By Jody Apple

Third, the need for the gospel to go to all the world, unfettered by previous misconceptions, biases or prejudices against any people for any reason. And fourth, the absolute necessity of all those made in God's image—especially those remade and reborn in the image of the Messiah—to treat all other souls as equals. Whether in or out of the body of Christ, we must—to fulfill the second of the great commandments to “love your neighbor”—love all souls equally. Regardless of color, ethnicity, education, economics or any other potentially divisive issues. We must, in effect, treat all others the way our righteous God values and treats them.

Let's consider, first, the “equality of faith.”

Peter's role as one of the twelve apostles allowed him to see—firsthand, and from a very privileged position—things that even most first century Christians never saw. In fact, Peter called attention to that in his letters to these scattered Christians.

In his second letter Peter claimed to be an eyewitness of Christ's majesty and to have personally heard the voice of God “on the holy mountain” (2 Peter 1:16-18). None of Peter's readers could make that claim. Furthermore, Peter stated that his readers had never seen the Christ, yet they loved him and had faith in him (1 Peter 1:7-8).

In view of Peter's emphasis on what he had seen compared to what these Christians had not seen, you might imagine that Peter could easily have assessed his faith to be greater than theirs.

And yet, that's not what Peter said. He told his readers that they had “obtained like precious faith” (NKJV). The NASB words it, “to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours.” A footnote in that translation tells us that same “kind” meant same “value.” Other translations render it as “a faith of equal standing with ours” (ESV, RSV) and as “a faith as precious as ours” (NIV, NRSV). The thought: Peter's audience had “a part in the same holy faith” (BBE).

That squares with lexicons that define the term *isotimos* (“like precious faith”) as “equal, like of the same kind/value” (BDAG). Further explanation in the same lexicon notes “a faith of the same kind as ours = faith w. the same privilege as ours (i.e. the recipients are not less advantaged than the apostles).”

This harmonizes with Jesus' words to Thomas. Like Peter, Thomas was one of the twelve, privileged to have seen firsthand what Jesus did during his earthly ministry. Though he missed one opportunity to see the Lord in person, he did not miss the second opportunity. When granted that privilege he could not restrain his first impression: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28) Consider carefully the words of Jesus that follow: “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

Was there any difference between the faith of Peter and the readers of his letters? No. They had a faith of equal value, a faith “not less advantaged than the apostles.” Was their any difference between the faith of Thomas who saw the resurrected Lord and the faith of those “who have not seen and yet have believed?” No. Different means of coming to faith, yes. But different faith? Not at all. Both, according to Jesus, were “blessed.”

Our first point of emphasis—the “equality of faith”—only makes sense when we get to the next element of our study, the righteousness of God and Christ.

There's no way to adequately introduce and then fully discuss everything that Scripture reveals—i.e., what God says—about God's own righteousness. We must be as concise as possible here, even though lexical definitions for righteousness and related terms are often lengthy and fairly intricate. That's not to say that they are inadequate or inaccurate. It's only to note that we must take a short cut. All Scripture, in effect, serves as theodicy—a God-written, self-justifying text—that defends God's character and God's actions. Overall, God defends Himself as just, as merciful, as fair and equitable—especially so with regard to what God thinks, says and does relating to redemption. God's righteous character always translates into God righteous behavior.

In this particular context, God's righteous behavior comes across in that those non-eyewitnesses—the second generation Christians that made up Peter's audience—had “obtained like precious faith.” The righteousness of God, and everything that God from eternity through history provided, allows non-eyewitnesses to have a faith equal to Peter's and Thomas' faith in every way.

God's righteousness, of course, has always been such that any who come to faith in God, in Messiah and in God's Word have been able to do so on an equal plane—thus receiving equal blessings—equal to all others who come to faith. In this regard, God not only made all souls equal, God treats all souls.

That brings us to our third detail: The Gospel must go into all the world without hindrances of any kind. Peter, before he was divinely directed to go to Cornelius's home, believed that it was “unlawful . . . for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation” (Acts 10:28). He would not have purposely gone through Samaria as did Messiah Jesus (John 4:1ff). That was not just part of Peter's history before this point in time, but it also became a part of what defined some first-century Christians (cf. Acts 11:3 and the Galatians letter as a whole). Peter, as we know, later waffled on that very issue (cf. Galatians 2:11ff).

Practical application of this third element: Nothing about what someone has been, or currently is, should prevent us from sharing the good news of God's saving grace with them.

Not the crimes that they have committed in the past.

Not the sins that they presently pursue.

Not where they stand in any humanly-devised system of measurement that counts them as anything other than a soul made in God's image.

Nothing counts them out. All need to hear of God's grace through the Christ.

Where they come from? It makes no difference.

What color they are—or are not? It makes no difference.

What they believe politically, religiously, culturally, etc. It makes no difference.

Why? Why do none of these things matter? Why should none of these things matter to us?

Because these things do not matter to God.

God, through His grace, sent Jonah to Nineveh, a pagan city of non-Jews. Why? Because God loves and because God cares. God through Elijah and Elisha saved and sustained a non-Jewish widow and healed a non-Jewish Syrian commander. Why? Because God loves and because God cares. Jesus repeatedly demonstrated selfless compassion for the oppressed, the down-trodden, those often overlooked by others. Widows, Romans centurions and their servants, lepers, the blind and the diseased, the multitudes—all frequently disregarded and disrespected by government and religious authorities—Jesus loved and cared for them all.

Following Jesus' example, that's just what we must do.

And, finally, we must not only take the Gospel to every lost soul in this world—we must treat every lost soul in this world with respect.

We can not fulfill “love your neighbor” if we treat them in any way less than the way God values and treats them. Whatever we assume to be a point of difference—and division—we must overcome.

We must overcome with Christ's love, grace, mercy and forgiveness. We must live the Gospel, not just believe the Gospel. We must live the truth, not just believe the truth. To do that demands that we respect all others as God values all souls.

We—all of us—as God's image bearers, are equals. We must strive to attain and respect equality of faith among all believers. We must learn to love and act like God, for His righteousness made us all, and treats us all, equally. There must be open proclamation and access to the Gospel of Christ for all. We, as God's people, must treat all humanity equally, unbelievers as well as believers.

Only in this way can we love God and love our neighbor. ▲